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## “DARK, MANY-TOWERED BOLOGNA”

BY VERNON LEE

*Sorge nel chiaro inverno la fosca, turrata Bologna.*—Carducci

ONCE or twice wandering about Bologna while my friends were at the Congress of Philosophers, I caught a glimpse . . . (or was it rather one of those sounds whose hearing is partly one of expectation?)—I caught, shall we say, the ghost of a mood; almost an emotion of forty years ago.

Forty years ago we used to come, pushed by my childish Machiavellian machinations, to Bologna on our way from the North to Rome. For Bologna seen between trains during a summer journey had become one of those places which exist only in childhood where, in virtue of some one thing acquiring a supernatural value, all the most ordinary circumstances of life come to partake of its magic; or rather as, under some summer full moon, just such a town as this, of its pleasure. At Bologna the wonder-working objects (like the ring you turn or the lamp you rub in fairy tales) were those gaunt rooms of the Music School whence issued for the earthly ear piano scales, fiddle exercises and vocal *arpeggi* of doubtful accuracy; but which, the walls being hung with the portraits of seventeenth and eighteenth century musicians, were filled for the ear of my childish fancy with their unheard music, or at least with their music's charm. Long afterward I was taken by my hospitable Contessa Carmelita to a concert in the hall where these portraits mostly hang. And while, alas, unable to see them otherwise than as lamentably ugly or unintentionally funny pictures, I swear that none of the music, however excellent, which I listened to with ears of the flesh in that or indeed any other place, has ever been a patch upon that silent music, or, as I have just said, music's fascination (for there were neither consecutive sounds nor combined ones, nor anything save my own musical emotion) of all those years ago.

It is a very curious experience, this catching the tail of an emotion of long ago. It is like what happens when by some trick of associative memory or of unconscious interpretation you suddenly smell lemon flowers, or wine-vats, or some more personal perfume in places where there is no trace of any such things. In the case of emotion such as this old, old one of Bologna, what stands for the London street, where there can evidently be neither lemon trees nor wine-vats, is your own elderly blasé self to whom red-brick battlements and Renaissance carved lintels and eighteenth century bobwigged portraits have become mere ordinary prosaic facts; and in whom, nevertheless, there suddenly arises the thrill of rareness and mystery which they once awoke, brief like the briefest lightning flash wherein one recognizes, in some inscrutable manner, that one is not one's present self, but that child of long years past.

They have restored churches and palaces in Bologna, Rubbiani and sundry other of my archæological acquaintances; and rebuilt or disengaged the Ghibelline battlements, like wild tulip petals, of the House of King Enzo, son of Barbarossa. But at the base of the two leaning towers there no longer hang those great basins and pudding-moulds and ewers and platters and pitchers which were more resplendent in their delicate copper rosiness and brass yellow, and in a way more mediæval almost, than any knight's armor in the town museum. And on the closed shutters of those venerable booths I read a printed notice: "The Coppersmiths Ildebrando and Oliviero inform their customers of their removal to a shop alongside the new market building." The new market building, cast iron and disinfectants, excellent modern products. But think that the predecessors of Ildebrando and Oliviero (fit names for the last of a chivalrous line!), or at least their copper-wares, had looked for seven centuries up the steep slanting sides of those two watch towers; and had been there, no doubt, when Dante also looked up at the clouds passing atop of them, and made a mental note of the simile for his Giant Hunters in Hell.

One of my haunts at Bologna was the Seven Churches round San Stefano. Seven they are called, though they seem far more numerous; a maze of low tin-roofed basilicas, chapels, crypts

and shrines, cloisters also, and damp monastic yards under bell-fries and mysterious corridors, with graves and tabernacles tucked away in them; barracco *Gesù Mortos* shelved where you expect only broken chairs and derelict besoms, and the Three Kings, huge black Gothic chessmen, frightening you as you come suddenly up against them, with their goggle stare. Sanctuaries of all kinds, and one within the other, smelling of bats and rats, in which I also seemed to breathe the pent-up centuries. Or is it that what we call “the centuries” *are* those places themselves, those low basilical roofs, those squat Romanesque arches, those reticulated walls; and is it on the contrary our fancy and feeling which they enclose to grope among strange altars and horned sarcophagi and tinsel Madonnas and carved apocalyptic beasts and yellow tapers guttering upon paper flowers? For in these Seven Churches and their purlieus there returned to my mind the suspicion that what we think of and feel as the Past, as the Religion and History of Other Days, is in many cases only the buildings and sepulchres they have left behind; our emotion being in reality only artistic, due to lines and curves and lights and shadows, and echoing steps, the result of a *mise-en-scene* only the more subtly theatrical that it is accidental.

These Seven Churches, and especially the Templar’s Church called House of Pilate, are such a *mise-en-scene* as Wagner aimed at creating in his *Parsifal*. The Bayreuth Grail Church attempts to make us feel as we did in that marvelous little circular church, with the great altar, sepulchre, ambones; one knows not what to call that mysterious symbolical edifice within an edifice, which looms with its crucifix and flights of steps and votive lights under that flat Byzantine dome. It is, this House of Pilate, a place of indescribable mystery and awe, compared with which Wagner’s Grail music is scarcely less futile a sham than his cardboard architecture. It is a place whose appropriate sounds would not be plain-chants even, however archaic, but mutterings and wailings and solitary footfalls; a building which has the shuddering nightmare quality of the moments before a wintry dawn.

There are not many such places as these Seven Churches,

even in Italy. The Renaissance swept them away; and, even if only with Jesuitic plaster and whitewash and frescoed perspectives, brought light and space and air everywhere. And one must go to Flanders and Germany to find them tucked away, dark corners, labyrinthine chapels and Gethsemanes, for bruised souls clinging to darkness.

When I had, as I thought, done with all this hive of hidden sanctuaries, I came, turning a corner, to yet another little black chapel. And in it an old beldame insisted on unlocking the "Sacred House of Loreto," as she called it, and telling me its unintelligible story. It seemed a narrow space behind an altar, where she set down a taper in a niche and, turning a handle and rolling back a shutter, displayed a black Madonna cocooned, in brocade, her star-crowned head barely emerging in puce and tinsel farthingale.

While looking at her I remembered that outside one of these same Seven Churches there is, let into the wall, and above a great horned stone coffin at the street corner, a Roman tablet, finely lettered with *Dominae Isidi Victricii*. Is not the subterranean worship of the Nile goddess still hidden in those churches and crypts and cloisters? May it not be the loin-cloth of ever-murdered, ever-resuscitating Osiris which hangs vague and white over the arms of the cross on that stair-cased sepulchral altar, under the dome of Pilate's House? And that black swaddled Madonna behind the shutters thrown open by the crone with her wax-dip, is not she perhaps the Victorious Lady?

Churches like these Seven Churches of Bologna (and probably whatever temples the subterranean cults of ancient times possessed) seem like the lairs, the hidden resting-places, where mankind has cowered in silence and darkness with its broken limbs and sores and fever visions, resting and healing itself between the real miseries of this world and the imagined terrors of the next.

How one does enjoy those fifteenth century Bolognese painters, mediocre to a man, after the over-gifted, over-strenuous Tuscans! They have the romantic, in a sense Spenserian, quality of mediæval poetry, and its preference for very young, almost childish, heroes in beautiful clothes. When one sees all these lovely beardless St. Sebastians and St. Georges, and even the

wicked Roman Emperors presiding over St. Cecilia's martyrdom, even the executioners heating the furnaces all so many curly Aucassins ready for Nicolettes, one wonders what the mentality of this provincial Renaissance can really have been. And only the more if one has been looking at the local tyrants, the family Bentivoglio portrayed by Costa in their own chapel, the rarest lot of half-fledged ruffians round a father looking like a renegade pirate.

Towards sunset there came a long and heavy shower.

The steps one goes down to the House of Pilate church and the little paved hole in which it stands deep below the level of the present city, were muddy and full of pools. The church itself was dark but for what came from the ill-lighted cloister within; and the great altar with its stairs and balconies, its look of being a temple, and a triumphal stage, and yet at the same time a pillory of some sort, loomed white in the dusk. At its foot, in an embrasure, flickered the only lamp, a glass cup with a night-light, flat on the marble slab. There, I felt, was *It*. *It*. What? The something whose white drapery hangs limp like a corpse over the arms of the cross on the top of that church inside a church. The whole place was full of *It*: *It*, a vague terror and sorrow.

But what frightened me was none of all this, but just a human being, a man, perhaps a tourist, standing still in the dusk before the altar. The sight of him almost made my heart stop. That is what much of religion must have been for primeval man; and this little Templar's church (or whatever in Italy takes the place of such) seems to be oozing with the mysteries of times long before Christianity, or even Paganism, was; the terror and sorrows of a nether world and of a nethermost soul.

The rain had stopped when I came out; and the sunset made the bricks of San Giacomo very rosy and lovely and put delicate shades upon the colored walls and white colonnades. And against the pure washed sky I noticed for the first time that the two leaning towers, which one thinks of as frowning dark, are really of an unsubstantial rose-color, weathered lilac, a color like that of the leafless woods on the Apennines above Bologna, bare just now, but already quickening under their delicate bark.

I sat for a long while, waiting for the rain to stop, in San Giovanni in Monte, where Raphael's St. Cecilia still hung when Dr. Burney visited Bologna in 1770. This church also was dark; but the round windows with Cossa's fine John on Patmos was like a set out of jewels, colored, luminous, blazing.

A few people came in. It is extraordinary how soothing and solemn an empty church becomes at this hour: the worshippers felt rather than seen, their poor personalities obliterated, themselves turned into the mere shadowy embodiment of the sadness and hope and fear and consolation one imagines them to bring and to carry away.

Again, at evening in those Seven Churches, their very names, *Atrio di Pilato* or *San Sepolcro*, wonderful; all those innumerable nooks and corners and gratings with a shrine, a Dead Christ, a Mater Dolorosa, something mysteriously suffering, hidden away. And in the little cloister with damp-green pavement in the shadow of the high walls and the belfry, you come upon a column with Peter's Cock; no barn-door fowl, but a sort of bird-divinity, like the winged sphinxes and sirens which the ancients set on pillars at Delphi and elsewhere. That nightlight at the foot of the great balustrade and staircased altar between the symbolic ox and eagle of the Evangelists, flickered in its marble embrasure, lighting the side of the time-polished slabs as a fire with its last flare might do at midnight.

As I was returning from my last regretful look round Bologna, there suddenly came, from the beautiful tulip-shaped belfry of San Pietro, a volley of bells, and (the most unexpected occurrence in Italy) actually *chimes*.

Their sound seemed to add to my old, or rather my childish, love of Bologna my more recent love of Oxford; the emotion special to that aristocratic swept and garnished English Past enhancing the emotion inspired by this Lombard city, so venerable but still so nobly alive.

VERNON LEE.